

The Impact of Mega Sports Events on the Strength of the National Soft Power: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract. *This article examines the strategic use of mega sports events as a means to enhance national soft power, exploring the complex interplay between international sports diplomacy and geopolitical influence. The study will examine how these events serve as means of economic and cultural diplomacy and also as platforms for global interaction through a comparative analysis of countries that include South Africa, Brazil, Russia, Germany, and Qatar. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research synthesizes the existing literature and case studies to provide information on the objectives, strategies, and outcomes associated with hosting such events. This study aims to contribute to the larger discussion on soft power and its effectiveness in the modern international arena by analyzing the complex effects of these mega events on national branding. It does this by providing a nuanced understanding of how major international sporting events can affect geopolitical dynamics and shape international perceptions.*

Keywords: soft power dynamics, sports diplomacy, mega sports events, FIFA World Cup, the Olympics.

Introduction

In the modern global arena, the strategic utilization of sports mega-events as tools of national soft power has surfaced as a key element of geopolitical influence and cultural diplomacy. This article initiates an in-depth exploration to unravel the intricate relationship between the organization of international sports events and their contribution to enhancing a nation's image on the global platform. With a particular emphasis on countries such as Qatar, Germany, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa, our research delves into the diverse mechanisms through which these nations employ mega sports events not just as opportunities for international interaction but as channels for economic prosperity and cultural diplomacy.

Rooted in the seminal theory of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, this study navigates the evolving contours of international relations, where the appeal of culture, political values, and diplomatic endeavors emerges as a fundamental strategy for asserting influence sans the employment of force. Through a qualitative methodology that integrates a review of existing literature with case studies, this research is designed to illuminate the goals, strategies, and outcomes fundamental to the staging of mega sports events.

By examining the comprehensive impacts of such events on national branding, this study aspires to contribute to the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of soft power in current international relations. It aims to provide a nuanced perspective on how global sporting events not only forge international perceptions but also significantly influence geopolitical shifts.

The evolution and significance of 'soft power' in international relations

International relations research has greatly benefited from Joseph Nye's late 20th-century proposal of the idea of soft power (Nye, 1990). Nye's formulation emerged against the backdrop of the Cold War's end, a period characterized by decreasing nuclear threats, burgeoning global integrations, and rapid technological advancements (Ercan, 2023). Soft power encapsulates a nation's ability to shape preferences and attitudes through attraction and co-optation, leveraging cultural, ideological, and institutional appeal (Zaiotti, 2023; Zhang, 2017). The idea that a nation's power could come from its foreign policy, political values, and culture is essential in this concept (Nye, 1990).

Early discussions of soft power emphasized its role in international politics, particularly in the context of the US's global influence (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2023). Scholars like Arda Ercan and others have explored the dimensions of soft power, including its economic aspects and the role of migration in shaping a country's normative appeal (Ercan, 2023). The evolution of the concept saw its application in various contexts, from understanding the influence of religious actors like the Holy See on global politics (Byrnes, 2017) to the strategic employment of soft power by countries like China (Vlassis, 2015). The multifaceted nature of soft power was further examined through frameworks like quantum international relations, which shed light on the complexity and non-linear aspects of influence and attraction in global affairs (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2023).

Contemporary discourse on soft power extends beyond its initial focus on cultural and political appeal, encompassing a broader spectrum that includes scientific, technological, and educational advancements (Bettine et al., 2022). The relationship between a country's soft power and its international policies, culture, education, and universalistic values has become a subject of increased scrutiny and interest (Gallarotti, 2022; Rofo, 2022). The concept has been critical to understanding how nations like Germany, the UK, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, or Qatar use mega sports events as tools to improve their soft power and reshape their international images (Grix et al., 2019). As soft power continues to evolve, its impact and relevance in international relations remain a key area of study, with ongoing debates and research enriching our understanding of this complex and nuanced form of power.

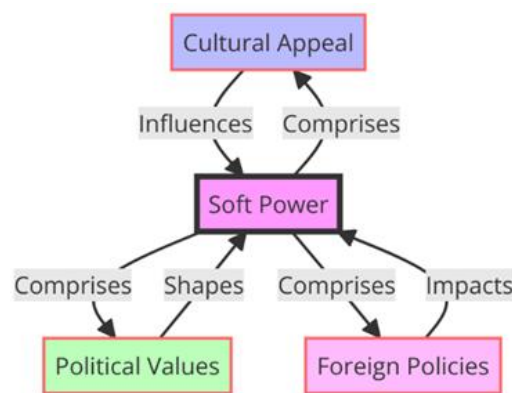


Figure 1. Interplay of soft power components: Joseph Nye's concept visualized

Source: Diagram created by the author, adapted from Joseph Nye's theory of soft power: (Nye 1990, pp. 32, 188-195).

Mega events and soft power

Mega events are large-scale, international events with profound impacts in multiple dimensions, often transforming host cities and nations in significant ways. Defined by their size, scope, and

complexity, these events include the Olympics, World Expos, and global summits, drawing worldwide attention and substantial public and private investment (Lauermann, 2022; Wolfe et al., 2021). Mega sports events, a subset of mega events, specifically focus on athletic competition at an international level, such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games. These events are distinguished by their global audience, extensive media coverage, and the potential for substantial economic, social, and infrastructure transformation in the host location (Boykoff, 2022; Grix et al., 2014).

The relationship between mega sports events and soft power is multifaceted and is increasingly recognised in international relations. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a nation to influence others through attraction and cultural appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). Mega sports events serve as a platform for nations to showcase their culture, technological prowess, and organisational capability, thus enhancing their soft power. They offer host countries a unique opportunity to project a positive image and influence global perceptions (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Grix & Lee, 2015).

Hosting such events allows countries to display their soft power through the celebration of universal values such as excellence, friendship, and respect in the context of sports. This display often results in improved international relations, enhanced national pride, and increased global visibility (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016). The soft power derived from these events can lead to tangible benefits, such as increased tourism, foreign investment, and a stronger global standing (Boykoff, 2022; Jeong & Grix, 2023).

However, the pursuit of soft power through mega sports events is not without its challenges. Issues such as cost overruns, environmental impacts, and potential human rights violations can lead to criticisms and protests, negatively impacting the host nation's image (Rocha & Xiao, 2022; Mair et al., 2021). In addition, the concept of sportswashing has emerged, where nations use these events to distract from less favourable aspects of their governance (Boykoff, 2022).

In conclusion, while mega sports events offer significant opportunities for nations to improve their soft power, they also present risks that must be carefully managed to ensure that the desired positive outcomes are achieved (Grix et al., 2019).

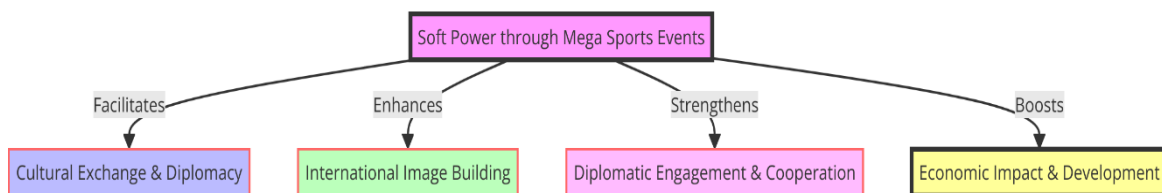


Figure 2: Dynamics of soft power in mega sports events

Source: Adapted from conceptual insights on soft power and mega sports events in scholarly literature and Joseph Nye's theory of soft power (Nye 1990, pp. 32, 188-195).

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the strategic deployment of mega sports events as a tool for enhancing national soft power, focusing on their role in improving a country's global image, fostering international relations, and influencing geopolitical dynamics. The objectives of the study are the following:

- To identify the relationship between hosting sports mega-events and the enhancement of national soft power.

- To compare the impact of sports mega sports events on soft power across different geopolitical contexts.
- To assess the evolution of sports mega-events' role in international diplomacy and cultural exchange.

Given the objectives described above, the hypothesis naturally emerges as follows:

Hypothesis: The hosting of mega sports events contributes to the enhancement of a nation's soft power, as evidenced by an improved international image, the fostering of international partnerships, and the advancement of cultural and economic diplomacy.

The research employs qualitative research using data from secondary sources. This analysis adopts a comparative case study approach to analyze the relationship between mega sports events and soft power in different geopolitical contexts.

The study takes a historical perspective on mega sports events as they are presented in scientific journal papers. A literature review approach to the selection of the journal papers was chosen, by using the search words: mega sports events and soft power across Google Scholar and Scopus in order to identify research on specific mega sports events and the way the host country used them as an opportunity to enhance their soft power. The selection criteria were based on relevance to the research hypothesis, scholarly rigor, and the diversity of the geopolitical contexts represented. This approach yielded five key papers that focus on distinct sports mega-events across different countries (South Africa, Germany, the United Kingdom, Qatar, Brazil, and Russia), providing a broad perspective on the subject matter.

The analytical framework is enhanced through a multifaceted comparative lens, focusing initially on the geopolitical context. It scrutinizes the complex political and international relations landscape surrounding the host nation at the time of the sporting event. Furthermore, the examination retains a critical focus on the soft power strategy, exploring how the hosting country capitalized on the event to amplify its soft power. This exploration remains dedicated to the conceptual framework chosen for the present research, respectively: Cultural Exchange and Diplomacy, International Image Building, Diplomatic Engagement and Cooperation, and Economic Impact and Development.

Table 1. The mega events included in the research

Name of the event	Sport	Date	Host country	Number of participants
2022 FIFA World Cup	Football	20 November – 18 December 2022	Qatar	32 football teams representing 32 countries from all over the world
2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games	Olympics	5 August – 21 August 2016	Brazil	207 nations represented by 11238 athletes
	Paralympics	7 September – 18 September 2016		159 nations, represented by 4328 athletes
2014 Winter Olympics	Olympics	7 February- 23 February 2014	Russia, Sochi	88 nations represented by 2780 athletes
2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games	Olympics	27 July - 12 August 2012	The United Kingdom	206 nations, represented by 10568 athletes
	Paralympics	29 August - 9 September 2012	The United Kingdom	164 nations represented by 4237 athletes
2010 FIFA World Cup	Football	11 June – 11 July 2010	South Africa	32 football teams representing 32 countries from all over the world

Name of the event	Sport	Date	Host country	Number of participants
2006 FIFA World Cup	Football	9 June – 9 July 2006	Germany	32 football teams representing 32 countries from all over the world

Source: <https://www.statista.com/topics/9211/2022-fifa-world-cup/#topicOverview>
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/280462/summer-olympics-1896-2012-number-of-participating-count>
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/815925/paralympics-number-countries/ries/>
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/266368/number-of-winter-olympic-games-participants-since-1924-by-gender/>
<https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/sochi-2014>

A comparative analysis of the geopolitical context

The geopolitical context within which mega sports events are held profoundly influences their impact on a host nation's international image and soft power. These events offer a stage for countries to articulate their identities, challenge global perceptions, and assert their cultural and political narratives.

Qatar: The geopolitical context of Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup is connected with its strategic initiatives, regional politics, and the global perception of its practices. Qatar's approach to hosting the World Cup was part of a broader national vision aimed at enhancing its international status and diversifying its economy besides its hydrocarbon dependence. The event was seen as a significant opportunity for Qatar to present itself as a modern society capable of organizing and hosting a global mega sports event, reflecting its aspirations under the Qatar National Vision 2030 (Chadwick & Anagnostopoulos, 2023).

Brazil: The geopolitical context of Brazil during the time of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games bid and hosting includes Brazil's economic growth and its impact on the global power balance. It was characterized by its strategic use of soft power through sports diplomacy to improve its international image. The country faced challenges, including its recognition as an emerging global power, regional support from neighbouring countries, and economic stability (De Almeida et al., 2013).

Russia: Russian activities which lead to the annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the Ukraine crisis that followed, which occurred around 2014, the year when Winter Olympics were held in Sochi, are some of the key factors of the geopolitical environment that Grix and Kramareva (2015) describe in their article. This period was marked by political volatility in the region and a shift toward a more pronounced imperial identity and anti-Western sentiment within Russia. The paper suggests that these events and Russia's broader foreign policy post-Olympics challenge Western-oriented soft power discourse and reflect a civilizational contest that will shape Russia's future soft power and great power ambitions.

South Africa: The geopolitical context in Tawfik Amer (2010)'s paper includes post-apartheid South Africa's focus on sports for nation-state building, reconciliation, and international image enhancement; the portrayal of the 2010 FIFA World Cup as a symbol of African renaissance and a testament to Africa's capabilities; regional efforts by SADC to promote tourism and economic development; and discussions about using such events to reform international systems.

Germany and the UK: The narrative for Germany and the UK, which host the 2006 FIFA World Cup (Germany) and the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (the UK), respectively, demonstrates an understanding of mega sports events as avenues for positive international signaling. The strategic use of sport is seen as an opportunity to "alter the often-negative stereotypes they hold"(Grix & Houlihan, 2014, p. 577).

In addition to being just a sporting event, Germany employed the 2006 FIFA World Cup as a strategic political move to change its reputation abroad post its reunification. Germany was trying to establish its place in a united Europe and the larger post-Cold War international order at the time, and the World Cup provided an opportunity to encourage openness, modernism, and unification. With Germany's past in the 20th century and its current attempts to reshape its identity in the 21st, this effort was particularly difficult. Houlihan & Grix, 2014).

The UK's hosting of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games occurred against a backdrop of financial crisis and geopolitical shifts, including concerns about global security and the UK's role in international conflicts. The Games provided a stage for the UK to demonstrate its resilience, diversity, and global leadership, at a time when its soft power was under scrutiny due to its involvement in international military engagements and the impacts of the global financial downturn (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

In synthesizing these perspectives, it is evident that while the objective of enhancing soft power through mega sports events is common, each nation's approach is profoundly shaped by its unique geopolitical context and strategic international objectives. From Qatar's narrative of modernization and cultural heritage to Brazil's democratic showcase, and from Germany and the UK's image reformation to Russia's imperial identity assertion, these events are intricately woven into the fabric of international relations and geopolitical discourse.

Table 2. Geopolitical contexts of mega sports events

Country	Geopolitical Context
Qatar	Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup was a key milestone in its long-term strategic initiatives under the National Vision 2030. The event was used to accelerate the country's economic diversification away from hydrocarbons, aiming to establish Qatar as a leading global player in various sectors, including sports, tourism, and international diplomacy.
Brazil	During the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Brazil aimed to assert its status as an emerging global power, leverage sports diplomacy under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva amid economic and leadership challenges.
Russia	The Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 occurred amidst Russia's political volatility, including the annexation of Crimea, reflecting a shift towards a more imperial identity and anti-Western sentiment, challenging Western soft power discourse.
South Africa	Post-apartheid South Africa used the 2010 FIFA World Cup for nation-state building, reconciliation, and enhancing its international image, portraying the event as a symbol of African renaissance.
The UK	The UK's hosting of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games aimed at image reformation, leveraging the event to project a modern and dynamic international image.
Germany	Hosting the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Germany sought to improve its international image and alter negative stereotypes, using the event as an avenue for positive international signaling.

Source: Authors.

Soft power strategies

Qatar: Football is used by Qatar as a means for nation branding and projecting soft power. It mentions specific initiatives such as the Generation Amazing legacy initiative, which is part of Qatar's diplomatic efforts related to the World Cup. The soft power strategies of Qatar for the FIFA World Cup include using football as a platform for nation branding, engaging in diplomacy, and promoting resource dependencies (Chadwick & Anagnostopoulos, 2023). Initiatives like the Generation Amazing legacy initiative are part of these diplomatic efforts. Some examples of Qatar's diplomatic approach include the acquisition of very well-known football players like Lionel Messi and Neymar for Paris Saint-Germain, a football team owned by Qatar, and being the host of the FIFA World Cup.

Brazil: The soft power strategy of Brazil involves using the hosting of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games as a means to enhance Brazil's global image and influence through cultural diplomacy, international image building, and the promotion of national values and ideologies (de Almeida et al., 2013). The concept of "ball diplomacy" is also part of this strategy, using sport to engage with different countries and improve Brazil's soft power.

Russia: The paper suggests that the Sochi Winter Olympics contributed to a trend toward a more pronounced imperial identity and anti-Western sentiment within Russia. Grix & Kramareva (2015) highlight that the Western media predominantly framed the Sochi Olympics as an attempt by Russia to gain recognition as a great power. Soft power in Grix & Kramareva's paper is characterized by a focus on domestic audience targeting, with the intention of fostering national self-worth, patriotism, and a viable national identity. The Sochi Winter Olympics were used as a tool for domestic soft power rather than external signaling, aiming to consolidate Russia's great power claims and inform the West of its desired status in the global political hierarchy.

South Africa: The soft power strategy in Tawfik Amer (2010)'s paper is not explicitly defined as a single strategy but can be inferred from various parts of the paper. It involves marketing South Africa as a travel and investment destination, enhancing the country's worldwide reputation, elevating national pride and unity. The strategy also involves using sports as a diplomatic resource and a basis for soft power, which includes cultural diplomacy and international image building.

The UK: The UK's strategy for the 2012 Olympics focused on reshaping its perception to reflect a progressive, inclusive, engaging, and innovative identity (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). This rebranding effort was part of a broader public diplomacy strategy, which included initiatives like the International Inspiration program to engage youth in sports globally. The strategy focused on showcasing Britain as a vibrant, open, and creative society, utilizing the Games as a platform to strengthen economic opportunities, enhance security, and promote cultural and social diversity, aiming for a lasting positive impact on the UK's international reputation (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

Germany: Germany's soft power strategy involved long-term planning, coordination, and implementation, with significant resources allocated to campaigns aimed at improving Germany's image abroad. The campaigns were designed in collaboration with various partners, including businesses, FIFA, and the German Football Association. The "Welcome to Germany: Land of Ideas" campaign was particularly highlighted as a successful initiative that showcased German culture, aimed at attracting tourism and foreign investment, and continued beyond the World Cup event (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

Table 3. Leveraging soft power through mega sports events

Event & Country	Cultural Exchange and Diplomacy	International Image Building	Diplomatic Engagement and Cooperation	Economic Impact and Development
Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup	Initiatives like Generation Amazing promote cultural diplomacy, using football to foster international goodwill and cultural understanding.	Hosting the FIFA World Cup and signing star players for PSG enhances Qatar's global image as a premier sports destination and dynamic nation.	The World Cup serves as a platform for Qatar to engage in global diplomacy, showcasing its commitment to international cooperation and community building.	Investments in sports infrastructure and events like the World Cup drive economic diversification, in line with Qatar's National Vision 2030 for sustainable growth.

Event & Country	Cultural Exchange and Diplomacy	International Image Building	Diplomatic Engagement and Cooperation	Economic Impact and Development
Brazil 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games	Promotion of national values and ideologies through the 2016 Olympics and Paralympics.	Using sport to enhance Brazil's global image and influence.	"Ball diplomacy" - engaging with different countries to improve soft power.	Positioning as a rising economic power and regional leader with a political role in the global arena.
Russia 2014 Winter Olympics	Focus on domestic audience with intentions to foster national self-worth and patriotism.	The Sochi Winter Olympics contributed to a trend toward a more pronounced imperial identity and anti-Western sentiment.	Predominantly a domestic soft power tool rather than external signaling, aiming to consolidate Russia's great power claims.	Used to inform the West of Russia's desired status in the global political hierarchy and mark re-emergence on the global stage.
South Africa 2010 FIFA World Cup	Marketing with an African discourse, focusing on nation-state building and the "rainbow nation".	Leveraging the 2010 FIFA World Cup to enhance international image and promote national unity and pride.	Government's fulfillment of guarantees to FIFA and unity shown during the event.	Long-term investment in various sectors, including tourism and investment, showcasing as a peaceful transition symbol.
The UK 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games	International Inspiration program engaging youth in sports globally.	Focus on rebranding to a as a vibrant, open, and creative society image during the 2012 Olympics.	Not explicitly detailed, but indicates a broader public diplomacy strategy including the Olympics.	Strengthening economic opportunities, enhancing security, and promoting cultural and social diversity.
Germany 2006 FIFA World Cup	"Welcome to Germany: Land of Ideas" campaign showcasing German culture.	Utilised the 2006 FIFA World Cup to improve international image.	Collaboration with businesses, FIFA, and the German Football Association.	Aimed at attracting tourism and foreign investment, continued beyond the World Cup.

Source: Authors.

Therefore, considering the analysis presented, it is evident that the hosting of mega sports events significantly contributes to the enhancement of a nation's soft power. Through a comprehensive review and comparative case study analysis, this research clearly demonstrates how these events serve as important platforms for nation branding, diplomatic engagement, cultural exchange, and economic prosperity. The findings from diverse geopolitical contexts, ranging from Qatar's strategic use of the FIFA World Cup 2022 to Brazil's multifaceted approach during the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, prove the validity of the hypothesis. These examples illustrate the capacity of mega sports events to foster an improved international image, enhance international partnerships, and advance cultural and economic diplomacy, thereby affirming the hypothesis that the hosting of mega sports events contributes to the enhancement of a nation's soft power.

Discussions

The strategic deployment of mega sports events as instruments of soft power by nations such as Qatar, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, the UK, and Germany underscores a complex, multifaceted approach to leveraging sports for international relations, cultural diplomacy, and economic prosperity. These events transcend mere athletic displays, embodying platforms for nation branding, diplomatic engagement, and cultural exchange, resonating with Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power as the capacity to influence through attraction rather than coercion. The case of Qatar, with its Generation Amazing initiative and strategic engagements surrounding the FIFA World Cup 2022, exemplifies the nuanced application of soft power, leveraging football for nation branding, diplomatic efforts, and economic diversification in line with sustainable growth ambitions. Similarly, Brazil's hosting of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games illustrates the intricate interplay between sports, national values, and international image building, aiming to position Brazil as a rising economic and regional leader.

The analysis extends to the internal dimensions of soft power, particularly in Russia, where the Sochi Winter Olympics highlighted a strategy focused on domestic audience engagement, national identity reinforcement, and the articulation of great power aspirations. This inward-focused approach contrasts with the more outward-looking strategies of nations like South Africa, which utilized the 2010 FIFA World Cup to enhance its international image, promote national unity, and project itself as a symbol of African potential and peaceful transition.

After having analyzed the case studies, it is imperative for future research to delve deeper into the nuances of how mega sports events serve as tools for augmenting soft power. This includes examining the role of sports diplomacy in projecting national values globally, catalyzing business generation, and fostering positive international perceptions. A promising avenue for exploration lies in the collaborative hosting frameworks among African nations, offering insights into the potential synergies and challenges of regional cooperation in leveraging sports events for soft power gains. Additionally, a critical analysis of the contrasting soft power strategies between countries like Russia and traditional Western approaches could illuminate the evolving dynamics of global influence and the efficacy of soft power.

Moreover, the impact of corporate sponsorships on soft power dynamics, particularly in the context of Qatar's strategic initiatives around the FIFA World Cup 2022, warrants further exploration. Initiatives like Generation Amazing not only exemplify the practical application of soft power principles but also highlight the potential of sports legacy projects to enhance diplomatic relations and support small state diplomacy, especially relevant in the African context.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has explored the intricate relationship between mega sports events and soft power, highlighting how countries use these events to enhance their global image and diplomatic reach. Through detailed case studies and theoretical insights, we've seen the strategic significance of such events for national branding, economic development, and international relations. Future research directions have been outlined, emphasizing the need for deeper understanding and exploration of sports diplomacy's impacts across different geopolitical contexts. This study contributes to the broader discourse on soft power and international relations, offering a foundation for further scholarly investigation.

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